

EQUITY

FORWARD

As The U.S. COVID-19 Death Toll Tops 100,000, The Trump Administration's Ideological Attacks On Fetal Tissue Research Continue To Endanger Vaccine and Disease Treatment Efforts

Research using fetal tissue has been instrumental for lifesaving disease treatment and vaccine development [since the 1930s](#) — creating vaccines for [polio](#), [the chicken pox](#), [measles](#), [rubella](#), [and shingles](#), as well as [treating Parkinson's](#) and currently working to develop a treatment for the [Zika virus](#). However, in 2019, [at the behest of anti-abortion lobbyists](#), the Trump Administration [implemented restrictions banning newly acquired fetal tissue research](#). The ban is now impacting our current health crisis; a prominent NIH infectious disease researcher unsuccessfully [petitioned the administration](#) to study treatments for COVID-19 using new fetal tissue donations.

This briefing lays out the different types of fetal tissue research as related to the Trump Administration's restrictions; how these restrictions are affecting the lifesaving research for COVID-19 and other vaccines; and how anti-abortion lobbyists continue working to curtail fetal tissue research — even in the face of a deadly pandemic.

Trump's HHS Banned Research Using Newly Acquired Fetal Tissue — So While Some Fetal Tissue Has Been Unaffected, Scientists Need All Resources Possible To Research Vaccines And Treatments For COVID-19

HHS' Fetal Tissue Research Review Led To The June 2019 Decision To Discontinue Federally Funded Research Requiring The New Acquisition Of Fetal Tissue. “The review also led to the decision to ‘discontinue intramural research -- research conducted within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) -- involving the use of human fetal tissue from elective abortion. Intramural research that requires new acquisition of fetal tissue from elective abortions will not be conducted,’ the agency said.” [[CNN, 6/5/19](#)]

Previously Procured And Preserved Fetal Tissue Can Still Be Used Today And Is Not Affected By The New Restrictions...

Fetal Tissue Procured In The 1960s Has Informed Many Common Vaccines — And Because This Tissue Can Grow Indefinitely In Petri Dishes, It Can Still Be Used Today. “Many of our other common vaccines, such as chicken pox, [rubella](#) and shingles, have been produced in tissue derived from fetuses, particularly two electively terminated pregnancies [from the 1960s](#). Advances in how researchers work with cells have allowed them to grow fetal cells indefinitely in Petri dishes, thus not requiring samples from any newly aborted fetuses.” [[CNN, 12/8/17](#)]

...However, Scientists Have Called Fetal Tissue Research “The Gold Standard” Of Research And Need All Resources Possible To Fight COVID-19

National Institutes of Health Scientists Pushed Back Against The Ban Of New Fetal Tissue Research, Calling It “The Gold Standard” Of Research

NIH Officials Committed To The Continuation Of Fetal Tissue Research Behind Closed Doors. “The National Institutes of Health pledged Tuesday at a private meeting of scientists who use fetal tissue that the government’s largest funder of biomedical research would continue to support such work despite a conservative broadside against it. The commitment by a senior official of NIH’s National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases to continue funding for researchers who work for nongovernment labs came at the end of a seven-hour meeting with about 40 scientists from around the country, according to three participants.” [[Washington Post, 12/19/18](#)]

- **The Invitation-Only Workshop Concluded Fetal Tissue Research Is ‘The Gold Standard.’** “Biological scientists currently have no better alternatives to using fetal tissue to give mice human-like immune systems, concluded scientists who convened yesterday at a National Institutes of Health (NIH) workshop to discuss the issue. Such humanized mice ‘remain the gold standard’ for many kinds of studies, the scientists said, and any alternative animal model should be tested against such mice before being widely adopted, according to a report on the closed-door workshop issued tonight by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), NIH’s parent department.” [[Science Mag, 12/19/18](#)]

At Least One Study Sought To Use New Fetal Tissue To Research A COVID-19 Treatment And Was Denied By The Fetal Government

An NIH Infectious Disease Expert Unsuccessfully Petitioned The Trump Administration To Lift Fetal Tissue Research Restrictions To Research A COVID-19 Treatment. “A senior scientist at a government biomedical research laboratory has been thwarted in his efforts to conduct experiments on possible treatments for the new [coronavirus](#) because of the Trump administration’s restrictions on research with human fetal tissue. The scientist, Kim Hasenkrug, an immunologist at the National Institutes of Health’s Rocky Mountain Laboratories in Montana, has been appealing for nearly a month to top NIH officials, arguing that the pandemic warrants an exemption to a ban imposed last year prohibiting government researchers from using tissue from abortions in their work.” [[Washington Post, 3/18/20](#)]

Scientists Negated The Trump Administration’s Claims They Are Exhausting All Resources To Fight The Pandemic, Pointing To Their Ban On Fetal Tissue Research.

“‘When I hear the vice president saying [they’re] doing everything they can to find vaccines [and treatments], I know that is not true,’ said one scientist familiar with the situation, referring to Vice President Pence’s daily news briefings of the White House’s coronavirus task force. ‘Anything we do at this point could save hundreds of thousands of lives. If you wait, it’s too late.’” [[Washington Post, 3/18/20](#)]

Anti-Abortion Advocates Have Led the Charge Against Fetal Tissue Research, Calling For So-Called “Ethical” Vaccines That Do Not Rely On Fetal Tissue — Slowing And Potentially Upending The Approval Of Promising COVID-19 Trials Underway

Anti-Abortion Advocates Including AAPLOG, The Family Research Council, And Students For Life Also Wrote To The FDA Expressing Support For A So-Called “Ethical” COVID-19 Vaccine

The Anti-Abortion Groups Wrote To The FDA That Some Vaccine Development Processes Do Not Rely On Fetal Tissue And That “No American Should Be Forced To Choose Between Being Vaccinated... [Against COVID] And Violating His Or Her Conscience.” “To be clear, we strongly support efforts to develop an effective, safe, and widely available vaccine as quickly as possible. However, we also strongly urge our federal government to ensure that fundamental moral principles are followed in the development of such vaccines, most importantly, the principle that human life is sacred and should never be exploited... no American should be forced to choose between being vaccinated against this potentially deadly virus and violating his or her conscience. Fortunately, there is no need to use ethically problematic cell lines to produce a COVID vaccine, or any vaccine, as other cell lines or processes that do not involve cells from abortions are available and are regularly being used to produce other vaccines.” [[Letter Sent To FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn, 4/17/20](#)]

Anti-Abortion Advocates Have Also Praised Republican Lawmakers’ Efforts To Negate Fetal Tissue Research’s Utility For Vaccine Research

Anti-Abortion Representatives And Senators Wrote To President Trump Falsely Negating Fetal Tissue Research’s Utility. “Pro-life members of Congress are urging the Trump administration to keep measures in place intended to protect unborn life and the dignity of fetal remains as abortion advocates push for them to be loosened during the coronavirus health crisis... ‘These critical litanies, however, repeat false claims and narratives which for many years have touted the utility of aborted fetal tissues in research, including the claim that aborted fetal tissue has been used to create many vaccines,’ the [letter](#) from House members said. A similar [letter](#) from senators accused advocates of fetal tissue research of attempting to ‘exploit’ the coronavirus crisis, adding ‘such unethical practices are unnecessary.’” [[National Review, 4/16/20](#)]

SBA List President Marjorie Dannenfelser Praised Anti-Abortion Lawmakers’ Efforts To Maintain Fetal Tissue Restrictions, Claiming That Alternative, “Ethical” Research Is Available To Find A COVID Cure. “Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the pro-life Susan B. Anthony list, praised the efforts by members of Congress and accused the abortion industry of exploiting ‘fears surrounding the pandemic to promote an extreme abortion agenda.’... they insist that unethical experiments involving aborted baby body parts are necessary to find a cure for the coronavirus, ignoring the wide variety of ethical options already available and under development.” [[National Review, 4/16/20](#)]

Many Of These Same Groups Had Similarly Lobbied The Trump Administration To Restrict Fetal Tissue Research In Years Past

45 Anti-Abortion Leaders Sent A Letter To HHS Secretary Alex Azar Expressing Outrage Over The FDA’s Contract With A Fetal Tissue Procurement. “The announcement follows the release of a letter sent earlier this month by 45 anti-abortion leaders to HHS Secretary Alex Azar, expressing outrage about the Food and Drug Administration’s contract and urging him to end government funding for fetal tissue research. In 2017, the National Institutes of Health spent roughly \$98 million on the research.” [[STAT News, 9/25/18](#)]

Anti-Abortion Groups Including SBA List And Its Research Arm Influenced Trump Administration’s Targeting Of Fetal Tissue Research. “Since HHS announced in late September a wide-ranging audit of the use of fetal tissue in federally funded research, groups that have long sought to outlaw its use say they are finally being heard. They view such research as morally repugnant and unnecessary because they contend other techniques can be used — an assertion many scientists reject. ‘This is a pro-life administration,’ said David Prentice, vice president and research director of the antiabortion Charlotte Lozier Institute, who said members of his group and the affiliated Susan B. Anthony List have met with Pence to press their case. ‘It’s just nice to have someone who will listen and not just close the door in your face.’” [[Washington Post, 12/12/18](#)]

Anti-Abortion Advocates Have Pushed For Alternatives To Fetal Tissue Research — Ignoring Scientists Who Say That For Some Types Of Research, Only Fetal Tissue Can Be Used

Scientists Have Long Researched Alternatives That Political Ideologues Would Not Block Them From Obtaining — But They Have Not Yet Found Any That Serve All The Same Purposes As Fetal Tissue. “[Alternatives] are less politically controversial — in some states, it is illegal to do any research on fetal tissue, and using other kinds of tissue can make it easier for scientists to collaborate. Researchers have been working on developing tools that do not depend on fetal tissue for decades... [But] There are no alternatives that can, today, serve all the same purposes as the controversial technology.” [[STAT News, 12/17/18](#)]

The Scientific Community Has Also Argued That Fetal Tissue Is Unique And That Certain Experiments Can Only Be Conducted Using It. “‘The consensus is that there are certain things about fetal tissue that make [it] unique,’ said Paul Knoepfler, a professor at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine. ‘Certain experiments can really only be done on actual fetal tissue.’” [[STAT News, 12/17/18](#)]